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# News Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Primaries

William L. Benoit

*Ohio University*, [benoitw@ohio.edu](mailto:benoitw@ohio.edu)

Corey Davis

*University of Wisconsin, Whitewater*, [davisc@uww.edu](mailto:davisc@uww.edu)

Mark Glantz

*St. Norbert College*, [mark.glantz@snc.edu](mailto:mark.glantz@snc.edu)

Jayne R. Goode

*Governors State University*, [jgoode2@govst.edu](mailto:jgoode2@govst.edu)

Leslie Rill

*University of Nevada, Reno*, [lrill@unr.edu](mailto:lrill@unr.edu)

*See next page for additional authors*

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## **Authors**

William L. Benoit, Corey Davis, Mark Glantz, Jayne R. Goode, Leslie Rill, and Anji Phillips

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### Abstract

President George W. Bush was completing his second (and final) term in office and Vice President Dick Cheney decided not to run for president. Thus, the 2008 American presidential primary is the first “open” campaign (with no sitting president or vice president competing) since 1952 with highly competitive primaries for both major political parties. This study uses content analysis to investigate news coverage (national newspapers, network television news, and local newspapers) of the 2008 American presidential primary campaign. Most themes in the news concerned the horse race (66%) with somewhat more emphasis on the candidates’ character (18%) than their policy proposals (15%). The most common topics of horse race comments were campaign strategy (24%), campaign events (19%), polls (17%), and predictions (12%). More news comments were positive (62%) than negative (32%) with few comments about the candidate’s defenses (7%). Most comments were unattributed (statements by journalists: 66%); candidates were quoted or paraphrased in about one in five comments; the remaining comments were from supporters (8%) or others (7%).

Key Words: 2008, presidential, primary, news coverage, topics, sources

### Introduction

The 2008 American presidential campaign was fairly unusual for three reasons. First, the 2008 was the only “open” campaign in recent history. In every election since 1952 the American presidential campaign has included either a sitting president or vice president as a candidate. However, in 2008, President George W. Bush was completing his second and final term as president and Vice President Dick Cheney decided not to run for the top slot. Although some recent campaigns have seen challenges to renomination of the incumbent (e.g., in 1992 Pat Buchanan challenged President George Bush for the Republican nomination; in 2000 Bill Bradley ran against Vice President Al Gore for the Democratic nomination), the lack of an incumbent in 2008 made the primary races in both political parties highly competitive. This meant that messages from and about the candidates were particularly important for voters in this election. Second, even though the primary campaign commenced earlier than ever before, the Democratic nominee was not decided until much later than usual, with Senator Barack Obama finally winning the nomination over Senator Hillary Clinton in June. Third, 2008 was first time a nominee for one of the two major political parties in America was not a white male. When Senator John McCain selected Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate, it assured that for the first time in our

history the elected President or Vice President would not be a white male. Thus, the campaign that led to this historic election merits scholarly attention.

News coverage of political campaigns is important for several reasons. First, the news is another channel for information about the candidates and the campaign to reach voters. Second, the news media selects which information to pass along to voters – it does not merely retransmit messages from the candidates. Third, the news can evaluate or assess the campaign information it supplies to voters. Research indicates that the amount of coverage received by candidates, the tone of the coverage, and the amount of horse race coverage focusing on a particular candidate can affect voters' perceptions of candidates (Ross, 1992). Jamieson (1992, p. 167) argued that covering campaigns as strategy “encourages voters to ask not who is better able to serve as president but who is going to win.” Thus, it is important to study news coverage of campaigns as well as messages from candidates (e.g., TV spots, debates). Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) content analyzed news coverage of American primary campaigns in the *New York Times* from 1952-2004. This study updates that study to include the 2008 presidential primary and extends the sample to include other national newspapers, national network news, and local newspapers. First, the literature on primary campaign news coverage will be reviewed. This will lead to a statement of purpose for this study (research questions and hypotheses). Then the sample and method will be described. Results will be reported and implications discussed.

### **Literature Review: Presidential Primary Campaign News Coverage**

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to understanding news coverage of election campaigns. Some research investigates campaign coverage in television news (e.g., Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003; Lichter et al. 1999). Coverage of nominating conventions (e.g., Adams, 1985; Patterson, 1980) and of the general election campaign phase (e.g., Benoit et al. 2005; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991) have been studied. Other research has investigated press coverage of non-presidential contests (e.g., Graber, 1989; Kahn & Kenney, 1999).

Patterson (1980) found that the election game (horse race; winning, losing, polls, events) accounted for almost two-thirds of the primary coverage in network news, newspapers, and news magazines in 1976. Substance, including both policy and candidate character, comprised about one-quarter of the stories. Graber (1988, p. 79) reported that news coverage “during the [1976] primaries concentrated very heavily on fleeting campaign activities and vote tallies in state contests, slighting a discussion of the policy stands taken by the candidates.” Robinson and Sheehan (1983), examining coverage in the 1980 primary and general campaign, found an emphasis on horse race coverage. Brady (1989) studied UPI coverage of the 1984 presidential primary campaign: 16% of the lines in these stories addressed the candidates' policy and 23% concerned the candidate's character and leadership ability; 21% addressed the potential success of the candidates, 20% related to campaign events, 11% concerned attacks on

opponents, and 9% were about their supporters. Farnsworth and Lichter (2003) reported that network news coverage of horse race in the primary campaign increased from 49% in 1988 to 78% in 2000.

King (1990) investigated *USA Today* and *New York Times* coverage of the presidential primaries in 1988. Horse race coverage dominated both papers' news (88.8% for *USA Today*, 73.7% for *New York Times*). Campaign issues (e.g., controversies and gaffes) were the second most common topic at (7.5% and 11.2%). Policy concerns (2.1%, 7.5%) and the candidates' character (1.6%, 7.5%) were less common topics. Johnson (1993) found in the 1988 primaries that polls accounted for 23% of newspaper and 29% of TV coverage; expectations 22% and 20%, momentum 18%, 15%, organization/finances 14%, 7%, endorsements 8%, 13%, and outcome/delegates were 16% in each medium (this study did not quantify the frequency of policy or character). Just et al. (1996) investigated newspaper and TV coverage of the primary and general campaign of 1992; inspection of their line graphs indicates that about 60% of stories mentioned the horse race and the candidates' character; in contrast, only about 40% of stories addressed issues. During the 1992 campaign, Buchanan (1996) found that candidates devoted 68% of their messages to issues whereas the media addressed issues in only 21% of coverage. He also found that the tone of media coverage "was substantially more negative than the tone of. . . the candidate discussions of themselves and other candidates" (1996, p. 149). Steger (1999) looked at *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* coverage in 1996 primaries, finding that negative coverage was most common, followed by mixed coverage and, least frequently, positive coverage. Horse race coverage was most common, followed next by policy and then by character. Lichter and Smith (1996) analyzed network news coverage of the 1996 presidential primaries. Horse race accounted for 51% of statements, policy 20%, and character 19%. The Project for Excellence in Journalism investigated news coverage of the early primary campaign in 2000:

Roughly 80% of the early election campaign coverage discussed tactics of the candidates and parties, fundraising by the campaigns, and internal organizational problems. Only 13% of the stories were about the candidates' ideas, their honesty, or what they had done for their constituents in previous elected offices (Skewes, 2007, p. 13).

Again, the news offers comparatively little emphasis on policy and character. Vinson and Moore (2007) investigated candidate messages and news coverage of the 2000 presidential primary in South Carolina. They report that the media stressed horse race more than candidate messages whereas candidates discussed policy issues and character more than the media. They also found that when issues were discussed, the media mainly talked about the Confederate flag at the statehouse but the candidates tended to stress Social Security, military policy, and education. Benoit et al. (2007) studied coverage of the 2004 presidential primary campaign in local newspapers, national newspapers, and nation-

al television news. The coverage privileged horse race (65%) over character (22%) or policy (13% topics). The tone of the news was more positive than negative (53% to 47%). The most common types of horse race coverage were strategy, polls, and events. Finally, more statements were from reporters than attributed to candidates, and candidates were quoted more often than others. Farnsworth and Lichter (2012) reported that the three major television networks in the 2008 primaries discussed horse race (71%) more than policy (14%); the tone of coverage for Democrats was more positive than for Republicans (66% to 48%).

So, extant research on primary campaign news reports that horse race was the most common topic, more common than policy or character. Usually the news devoted more time and space to character than policy. The tone of coverage was more likely to be negative than positive. Unfortunately, few studies examine policy and character as separate topics; rarely does research report the kinds of horse race coverage. Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) analyzed *New York Times*' coverage of presidential primary campaigns from 1952-2004. Overall, horse race coverage was the most common topic (66%), followed by character (16%) and then policy positions (12%). Horse race coverage was comprised mainly of campaign strategy (45%), polls (11%), campaign events (9%), predictions (8%), endorsements (7%), and outcomes. News coverage stressed character more, and policy less, than candidate messages. These stories were more positive than negative but were more negative than candidates' messages from the same time period.. Reporters (remarks for which no source was identified) were the most common source of statements (55%), followed by candidates (25%), supporters (11%), and others (9%). It would be useful to apply this approach (especially distinguishing policy and character and identifying the forms of horse race coverage) to the 2008 presidential primary campaign.

### **News Coverage of Political Campaigns**

Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) posit a theory of election campaign coverage. Journalists seek a large audience of readers and/or viewers. Probably the main reason for this desire is the profit motive (see, e.g., McManus, 1994; Schudson, 1995). Second, it is personally gratifying to have a large audience. This desire for a large audience means that journalists look for news that is novel and interesting. Campaign events, such as rallies or speeches, change every day. Buchanan (1996, p. 154) observes that "the media . . . is obsessed with the process, the inside political story" (see also Hamilton, 2004; Marcus et al. 2000; McChesney, 2004; Patterson, 1994; Petrocik, 2004). Political polls are taken frequently during important races and the relative positions of the candidates can shift from poll to poll – in contrast, although candidates occasionally articulate new policy positions (or change their policy positions; although that risks the charge of "flip-flopping") – there can be no doubt that the horse race changes more often than policy positions. Similarly, new information sometimes arises about a candidates' character, but that too occurs less frequently than changes in the horse race. Furthermore, the horse race, by nature is about competition,

which can add suspense and interest to stories. So, to keep the news interesting—and to attract a larger audience—news coverage is prone to stress horse race more than policy or character. Unfortunately, the substantive importance of a story is a less important consideration in the news. Graber (1989, p. 86) reported that newspaper and television editors indicated that the three most important factors in choosing a story are conflict, proximity, and timeliness; “Conspicuously absent from their choice criteria was the story’s overall significance.”

Second, it is simply not possible for a reporter to have expertise on every possible policy topic: jobs, immigration, terrorism and national defense, taxes, education, the environment, health care, Social Security, commerce, and so forth. It is far easier for reporters to become experts on the horse race or the election as a game: “The prevalence of strategic coverage can be partly explained by the fact that most political reporters, particularly those who cover campaigns, are greater experts in politics than they are in policy” (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, p. 168; see also Schudson, 1995; Skewes, 2007). Some reporters believe horse race coverage is what prevents a campaign from being “a mighty dry and colorless affair” (Floyd, 2004, p. 1B).

Robinson and Sheehan offered an additional explanation for the news media’s emphasis on horse race aspects of the campaign:

Objective journalism has, for a century and a half, defined news as *events*, as happenings. “Horse races” happen; “horse races” are themselves filled with specific actions. Policy issues, on the other hand, do not happen; they merely exist. Substance has no events; issues generally remain static. So policy issues, or substance, have been traditionally defined as outside the orbit of real news. (1983, p. 148)

Tradition is yet another reason for the news to emphasize horse race over substance. For these reasons, Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) predict:

H1. News on the 2008 presidential primary campaigns will emphasize horse race coverage more than policy or character.

Furthermore, the desire to attract a large audience can influence the tone as well as the topic of campaign coverage. An emphasis on attacks in news coverage (negative tone) can be assumed to attract a large audience because conflict is interesting (Patterson, 1994). The idea that the press is a watchdog that polices our government seems to have encouraged the press to be more cynical (Patterson, 1994). Additionally, some journalists believe that if they criticize all candidates, that will foster the impression that they (journalists) are fair. Although coverage of general campaign messages is mostly negative (see Benoit et al. 2005), research on candidate messages shows that messages in the primary tend to be more positive than general election messages (Benoit, 2007). Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) found that the tone of *New York Times*’ coverage of

the presidential primaries from 1952-2004 was more positive than negative. So, we predict in 2008 that:

H2. The tone of news coverage of the 2008 primary campaigns will be more positive than negative.

However, Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) also predict that primary news coverage is more negative than the messages from candidates.

H3: The tone of news coverage of political campaigns will be more negative than that of candidate messages.

Research shows that news coverage of presidential primary and general debates has more attacks than the debates themselves (Benoit et al. 2004; Benoit et al. 2004). *New York Times'* coverage of primary (Benoit et al. 2010) and general (Benoit et al. 2005) is also more negative than the messages of the candidates.

Many journalists seem to believe that the candidates' character, or personality, to be more interesting than policy, which leads them to emphasize character so as to attract readers or viewers. Clarke and Evans (1983, p. 39-42) surveyed reporters who covered U.S. House of Representative races in 1978 (and analyzed the newspaper stories in these papers), concluding that:

Candidates are above all recognized for speaking out on particular policy positions.... Strikingly, issue-related topics recede when reporters turn to analyzing the strengths and weaknesses that they think will determine the election.... On the whole, candidates do not dwell on these [personal] characteristics in their appeals to voters. Yet journalists believe that they are important factors in determining the outcome of a congressional race.

So, candidates focus more on issues than personal characteristics in their campaign messages, whereas journalists tend to stress character. Skewes (2007, p. 57) notes that "in covering candidates for the White House, the one aspect of coverage that journalists universally agreed was important. . . was coverage of the candidates' character." For example, Dan Balz of the *Washington Post* explained that stories about policy issue are the ones "we suspect are to most readers the least accessible, the first ignored, and in many ways the least satisfactory" (Skewes 2007, p. 57). For these reasons we predict that:

H4. News coverage of political campaigns will emphasize character more than policy.

H5. News coverage of political campaigns will emphasize character more, and policy less, than candidate messages.

We also posed two research questions, following the previous study of *New York Times'* presidential campaign coverage:



RQ1. What is the relative proportion of the forms of horse race coverage?

RQ2. What is the relative proportion of the themes from reporters, candidates, supporters, and others?

Testing these predictions, and answering these research questions, should provide insight into news coverage of presidential primary campaigns.

### Method

This study investigates the nature of news coverage of the 2008 presidential primary election campaign. Then we discuss the samples and procedures employed here.

### Sample

This study examined news texts in three separate samples. First, stories in four local newspapers for the 28 days preceding the caucus or primary in that state were sampled (IA: *Des Moines Register* 12/6-1/2, NH: *Union Leader* 12/11-1/7, MI: *Detroit Free Press* 12/18-1/14, SC: *Post and Courier* 12/22-1/18). Second, three national newspapers (*USA Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*) and five television networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, FOX) were sampled from December 6, 2007 (the earliest date of the local newspaper sample) through February 6, 2008 (the day after February 5, a day which saw several primaries and caucuses). The following search string was employed to find one story per outlet per day: Biden or Clinton or Dodd or Edwards or Gravel or Kucinich or Obama or Richardson or Brownback or Giuliani Huckabee or Hunter or McCain or Paul or Romney or Tancredo or Thompson.

### Procedures

This study replicates the methods used in the study of *New York Times* coverage of presidential primary campaign news (Benoit et al. 2010). Categorical content analysis was employed; a codebook was developed with definitions and examples of all categories (see Benoit et al. 2005). Coders unitized the texts into themes, which are the smallest units of discourse capable of expressing an idea. Holsti (1969, p. 116) explained that a theme is “a single assertion about some subject.” Then they coded each theme for source, topic, subject, and tone.

Cohen’s (1960)  $\kappa$  was calculated on a subset 10% of the texts to determine inter-coder reliability because it controls for agreement by chance. Reliability for topic of utterance ranged from .74-.97, for tone was .88-.97, for identifying the source of a statement was .81-.93, for target of utterance it was .81-.93. Landis and Koch (1977) explained that values of  $\kappa$  over .81 represents almost perfect reliability and .61-.80 to reflect substantial agreement, so these data should be considered reliable.

*Chi-square* was employed to test for significant differences. This statistic is appropriate for investigating differences with frequency data. When possible, effect size is provided (effect size requires two variables so it is not meaningful with a *goodness-of-fit* test).

### Results

Overall (and in each of the three sub-samples), the first hypothesis was confirmed. News coverage of the 2008 presidential primary stressed the horse race (66%) far more than character (18%) or policy (15%). A *chi-square goodness-of-fit* test confirms that these frequencies are significantly different ( $\chi^2 [df = 2] = 5172.46, p < .0001$ ). See Table 1 for these data.

**Table 1**  
*Topics of 2008 Campaign News Coverage*

	Horse Race	Character	Policy
<i>USA Today</i>	499	206	109
<i>New York Times</i>	969	414	200
<i>Washington Post</i>	332	127	50
National Newspapers	1800 (62%)	747 (26%)	359 (12%)
NH Union Leader	356	149	145
<i>IA Des Moines Register</i>	273	183	168
<i>SC Post and Courier</i>	424	<b>77</b>	60
<i>MI Detroit Free Press</i>	711	202	189
Local Newspapers	1764 (60%)	611 (21%)	562 (19%)
ABC	279	39	125
CBS	92	10	9
NBC	426	36	42
CNN	919	179	216
FOX	1352	108	159
National Television News	3068 (77%)	372 (9%)	542 (14%)
Grand Total 2008	6632 (66%)	1730 (18%)	1463 (15%)
<i>NYT 1952-2004</i>	3231 (70%)	799 (17%)	590 (13%)

Note. 1952-2004 data from Benoit, Hemmer, & Stein (2010).

The second hypothesis concerned tone of coverage. As predicted, evaluative comments (some comments were simple descriptions and not coded for tone) were most often positive (62%) than negative (32%) with 7% of comments reporting on candidates' defenses against attacks. A *chi-square goodness-of-fit* test found a significant difference between positive and negative comments (defenses excluded) ( $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 525.26, p < .0001$ ). See Table 2 for these data.

**Table 2**  
*Functions of 2008 Campaign News Coverage*

	Positive	Negative	Defense
<i>USA Today</i>	<b>201</b>	113	12
<i>New York Times</i>	<b>377</b>	236	27
<i>Washington Post</i>	136	<b>247</b>	137
National Newspapers	714 (48%)	596 (40%)	176 (12%)
NH Union Leader	<b>446</b>	185	21

<i>IA Des Moines Register</i>	<b>436</b>	155	33
<i>SC Post and Courier</i>	<b>422</b>	177	31
<i>MI Detroit Free Press</i>	<b>691</b>	343	68
Local Newspapers	1995 (66%)	860 (29%)	153 (5%)
ABC	<b>103</b>	65	12
CBS	10	0	6
NBC	20	<b>37</b>	8
CNN	<b>309</b>	82	1
FOX	<b>190</b>	71	0
National Television News	632 (69%)	255 (28%)	27 (3%)
Grand Total 2008	3341 (62%)	1711 (32%)	356 (7%)
<i>NYT 1952-2004</i>	1230 (54%)	960 (42%)	77 (3%)

The third prediction anticipated that the tone of news coverage would be more negative than the tone of the candidates' messages. Data are available on the tone of two message forms from the 2008 presidential primary: debates and TV spots. This prediction was confirmed in both cases. Benoit, Henson, and Sudbrock (2011) found that acclaims were 68%, attacks 26%, and defenses 6% of primary debate utterances. Statistical analysis reveals that attacks were more frequent in the news than in the candidates' messages ( $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 64.22, p < .0001, \phi = .06$ ; defenses excluded). Benoit and Rill (in press) analyzed 2008 presidential primary TV spots, finding that 80% of statements were acclaims and 20% attacks (no defenses occurred in their sample). A *chi-square cross-contingency test* found that attacks were significantly more common in news coverage of the campaign than in the candidates' TV spots ( $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 115.82, p < .0001, \phi = .13$ ). So, although the tone of news coverage of the 2008 presidential primaries was more positive than negative, that coverage was more negative than the candidates' messages.

The next hypothesis predicted that news coverage of the 2008 presidential primary would stress character over policy. Excluding horse race comments, 54% of comments were about policy and 46% about character. Statistical analysis revealed that ( $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 22.16, p < .0001$ ). H5 contrasted news coverage with candidate messages during the campaign. Benoit, Henson, and Sudbrock's (2011) analysis of primary debates found that 70% of comments were about policy and 30% were on character. A *chi-square* confirmed that news coverage stressed character more, and policy less, than the candidates' messages ( $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 274.19, p < .0001, \phi = .13$ ). Benoit and Rill's (in press) analysis of 2008 presidential primary ads indicated that policy was more common than character (58% to 42%) and a *chi-square* test confirmed that the news stressed character more, and policy less, than the candidates ( $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 6.14, p < .05, \phi = .04$ ). So, this hypothesis was confirmed.

The first research question investigated the frequency with which the news addressed the forms of horse race coverage. In the 2008 presidential primaries, the four most common forms of horse race coverage were strategy (24%), cam-

paigned events (19%), polls (17%), and predictions (12%). These data are displayed in Table 3.1 and 3.2.

**Table 3.1**  
**Topics of 2008 Horse Race Campaign News Coverage**

	Strategy	Event	Polls	Predict
<i>USA Today</i>	101	43	84	23
<i>New York Times</i>	250	176	156	36
<i>Washington Post</i>	5	128	24	35
National Newspapers	356	347	264	94
	(21%)	(21%)	(16%)	(6%)
<i>NH Union Leader</i>	116	50	58	33
<i>IA Des Moines Register</i>	104	51	32	34
<i>SC Post and Courier</i>	123	85	51	76
<i>MI Detroit Free Press</i>	150	104	83	101
Local Newspapers	493	290	224	244
	(30%)	(18%)	(14%)	(15%)
ABC	73	39	28	18
CBS	5	0	6	7
NBC	52	26	26	55
CNN	93	165	132	77
FOX	302	209	223	190
National Television News	525	439	506	347
	(22%)	(18%)	(21%)	(15%)
Grand Total 2008	1374	1076	994	685
	(24%)	(19%)	(17%)	(12%)
<i>NYT 1952-2004</i>	1459	305	347	249
	(48%)	(10%)	(11%)	(8%)

**Table 3.2**  
**Topics of 2008 Horse Race Campaign News Coverage**

	Outcome	Funds	Endorse	Vote Choice
<i>USA Today</i>	48	51	46	4
<i>New York Times</i>	95	164	72	19
<i>Washington Post</i>	9	59	4	26
National Newspapers	152	274	122	49
	(9%)	(17%)	(7%)	(3%)
<i>NH Union Leader</i>	12	13	11	61
<i>IA Des Moines Register</i>	0	12	13	9
<i>SC Post and Courier</i>	51	5	21	32
<i>MI Detroit Free Press</i>	68	23	9	53
Local Newspapers	131	53	54	165
	(8%)	(3%)	(3%)	(10%)

ABC	19	15	21	9
CBS	13	11	14	16
NBC	46	16	27	33
CNN	93	44	58	0
FOX	1	39	100	0
National Television News	172	125	220	58
	(7%)	(5%)	(9%)	(2%)
Grand Total 2008	455	452	396	272
	(8%)	(8%)	(7%)	(5%)
<i>NYT</i> 1952-2004	218	175	236	57
	(7%)	(6%)	(8%)	(2%)

The second research question concerned the source of statements in the news. The most common source was the reporter or journalism (remarks not attributed to any source) at 66%. Candidates accounted for 19% of the statements in this sample, supporters were 8% and others 7%. See Table 4 for these data.

**Table 4**  
*Sources of 2008 Campaign News Coverage*

	Reporter	Candidate	Supporter	Other
<i>USA Today</i>	<b>549</b>	148	44	78
<i>New York Times</i>	<b>1282</b>	311	123	98
<i>Washington Post</i>	42	42	<b>162</b>	55
National Newspapers	1873	501	329	231
	(64%)	(17%)	(11%)	(8%)
<i>NH Union Leader</i>	<b>343</b>	165	105	39
<i>IA Des Moines Register</i>	<b>259</b>	233	63	70
<i>SC Post and Courier</i>	<b>315</b>	72	122	110
<i>MI Detroit Free Press</i>	<b>584</b>	276	97	145
Local Newspapers	1501	746	387	364
	(50%)	(25%)	(13%)	(12%)
ABC	<b>281</b>	126	15	20
CBS	<b>20</b>	3	4	11
NBC	<b>425</b>	52	2	33
CNN	<b>1053</b>	236	25	8
FOX	<b>1382</b>	172	0	65
National Television News	3161	589	46 (1%)	137
	(80%)	(15%)		(3%)
Grand Total 2008	6535	1836	762 (8%)	722
	(66%)	(19%)		(7%)
<i>NYT</i> 1952-2004	2719	1204	551	159
	(55%)	(25%)	(16%)	(5%)

### Discussion

As most previous research has indicated, the 2008 presidential primary campaign stressed horse race coverage more than character or policy. Although this result is not surprising, this study provides additional data – and data from multiple sources in three media: national newspapers (*USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*), local newspapers (*Union Leader*, *Des Moines Register*, *Post and Courier*, *Detroit Free Press*), and national television (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, FOX). In all three media horse race was more common than character or policy. Clearly, these data provide strong support for the claim that news coverage of campaigns stresses the horse race. This means voters have less opportunity to learn about the candidates' character or policy positions.

In coverage of the 2008 presidential primary the tone was more positive than negative. Again, this relationship held in all three subsamples. This news coverage was more positive than in past years (*New York Times*' coverage of the presidential primary from 1952-2004 also tended to be positive, with 54% of evaluative comments positive in tone and 42% negative). Defenses, which are the least common function in political campaign messages (see, e.g., Benoit, 2007) were less common in these samples than comments with a positive or negative tone. Although news tends to be more negative than candidate messages (see the next paragraph), political candidates tend to be more positive in the primary phase of the campaign than the general election phase. Accordingly, coverage of the primary campaign tends to be positive because the primary campaign is, comparatively, quite positive.

However, as has been demonstrated previously (Benoit et al. 2010), news coverage of presidential primaries reports attacks more frequently than attacks occur in the candidates' messages – and acclaims are under-reported when news coverage is compared with candidate messages. Thus, even though a positive tone was more common than a negative tone in 2008, the news was significantly more negative than the candidates themselves.

Newspapers, both national and local, devoted more themes to character than policy. Surprisingly, in this sample of national television news policy was more common than character. Although we would not argue that character is unimportant – the president must lead the nation and voters must trust the president to try to implement campaign promises and, perhaps more importantly, to deal appropriately with unexpected crises that were not addressed in the campaign. Still, the president and the executive branch of government implements policy, domestic and foreign, which makes policy very important. Benoit (2003) presented evidence that presidential candidates who discuss policy more, and character less, than opponents are more likely to win elections. For this reason it might be a positive sign that television news – like the presidential candidates themselves – stressed policy more than character. However, data shows that candidates in this campaign stressed policy more than television news in the debates and TV spots.

Although the existing literature consistently shows that horse race coverage is more common than discussion of policy or character, we know relatively little

about what horse race coverage looks like. Overall, campaign strategy, campaign events, polls, and predictions are the four most common topics of horse race. One exception is national newspapers, in which funds (fund-raising and spending) is one of the most common topics. We must keep in mind the nature of the samples employed here: The Iowa newspaper had no themes about outcome, which makes sense because that sample ended with the Iowa caucuses – and no voting results from any other state had happened at that point.

It is not surprising to learn that most statements in news coverage of presidential primaries have no source – are simply reporters and journalists talking. Candidates are quoted in about one-fifth of the statements in this sample. The data show that in these samples in 2008, quotations from candidates were least common on national news (with journalists providing no source for 80% of statements) to local newspapers, in which candidates were quoted in one-quarter of all statements.

### Conclusion

This study investigated news coverage of the 2008 American presidential primary campaign. The sample is noteworthy, including multiple outlets from three kinds of news outlets: national newspapers, local newspapers, and national television news. Although some variations can be expected, the results were remarkably consistent. News coverage stressed the horse race over character and policy. Particularly in national newspapers the stories discussed character more often than policy. The tone of coverage was mostly positive, but less positive than the candidates' primary messages (debates and TV spots) from the campaign. The most common horse race topics were campaign strategy, campaign events, public opinion polls, and predictions. Most statements in this sample were unattributed (assertions by reporters or journalists); candidates were quoted in about 20% of themes, with supporters and others occasionally quoted. These data add to our understanding of news coverage of presidential primary campaigns generally (topic and tone). They also extend our understanding of the topics of horse race coverage and sources of statements in the stories.

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*William L. Benoit, Ohio University, Corey Davis, University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, Mark Glantz, St. Norbert College, Jayne R. Goode, Governors State University, Leslie Rill, University of Nevada, Reno, and Anji Phillips, University of Missouri.*